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By- del Olmo, Guillermo

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The development, design, and purposes of these advanced proficiency tests are discussed, along with brief descriptions of their seven component parts--listening comprehension, speaking, reading, writing, applied linguistics, civilization and culture, and professional preparation. Some of the research inspired by the tests is identified. (AF)

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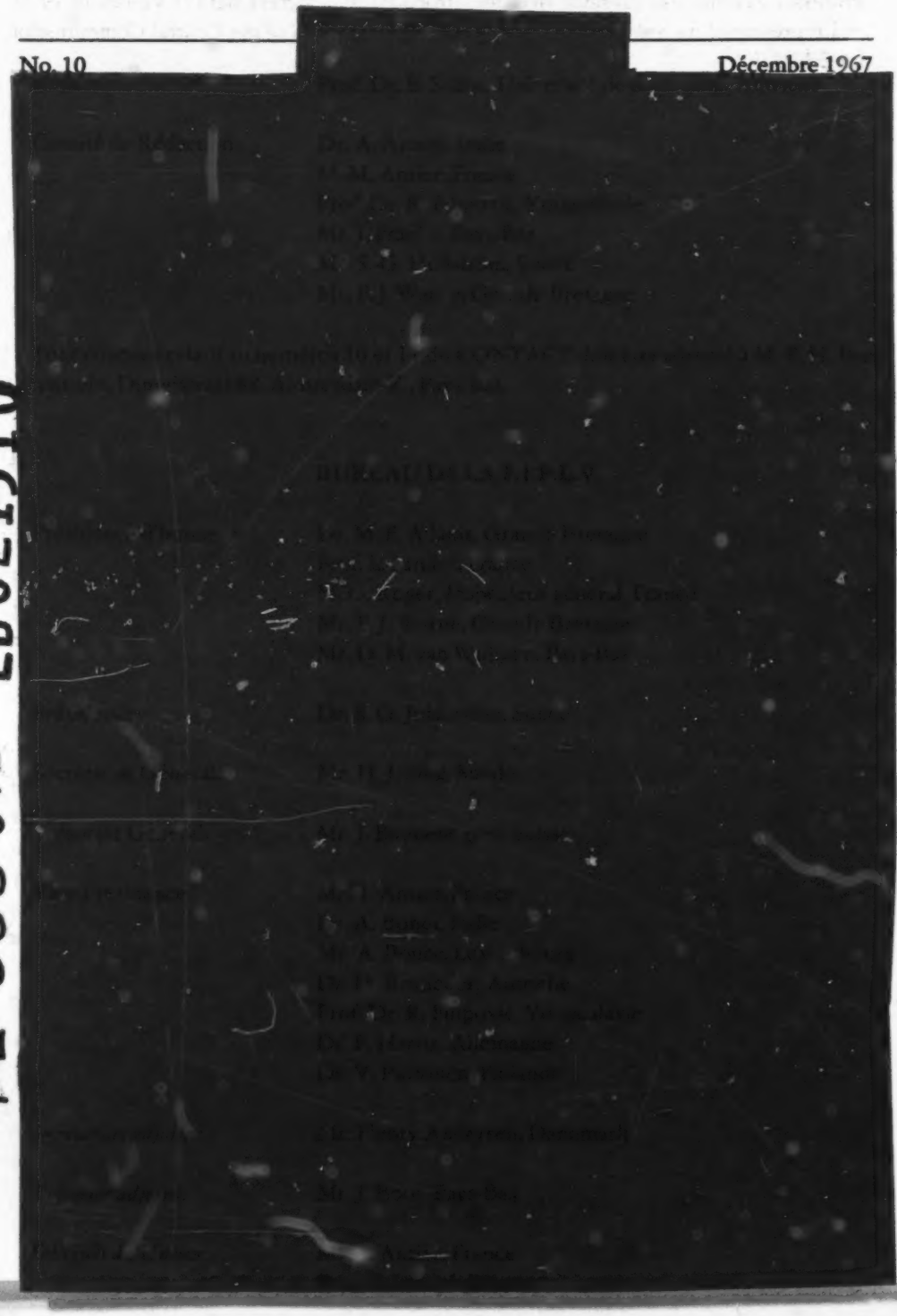

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The MLA foreign language proficiency tests for teachers and advanced students

by Professor Guillermo del Olmo, Director
Test Development, Modern Language Association
New York, U.S.A.

The Modern Language Association of America was founded in 1883. It is the largest (25,000 regular members) and one of the oldest of American learned societies in the field of the Humanities. It exists for the purpose of advancing literary and linguistic studies. While its primary activities are scholarly, during the last fifteen years it has played an increasingly important part in improving the teaching of English and of the foreign languages.

The campaign of the Modern Language Association to improve and expand the teaching of modern foreign languages in the United States has, since 1952, been supported by grants from the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations and the Carnegie Corporation, as well as by contracts with the U.S. Office of Education. The Foreign Language Program, inaugurated by William Riley Parker, has helped to revolutionize the teaching of foreign languages in the United States, and it has fostered a strong sense of professionalism among foreign language teachers at all levels, from elementary school through graduate education in universities.

The Steering Committee of the FL Program formulated in 1955 the "Qualifications for Secondary School Teachers of Modern Foreign Languages", a statement subsequently endorsed for publication by the MLA Executive Council, the Modern Language Committee of the Secondary Education Board, the Committee on the Language Program of the American Council of Learned Societies, and by the executive boards or councils of some fifteen other national and regional associations. The statement established three general levels of proficiency (Minimal, Good, and Superior) for seven areas of foreign language teaching competency: Listening Comprehension, Speaking, Reading, Writing, Applied Linguistics, Civilization and Culture, and Professional Preparation. In subsequent conferences, leaders in the fields of educational administration and foreign language teaching discussed and endorsed the development of standardized proficiency tests as an indispensable aspect of teacher preparation and certification.

In the spring of 1959 a grant by the U.S. Office of Education to the Modern Language Association made available the funds for development of nationally standardized qualification tests for teachers of French, German, Italian, Russian, and Spanish. Since in the United States there is no central government agency such as a Ministry of Education in charge of teacher certification (certification is handled at state and even municipal levels of government), it was obvious to many members of the profession that the Qualifications Statement described above would not be effective unless its description of competencies was implemented by means of nationally standardized tests. The MLA Statement of Qualifications for Teachers of Modern Foreign Languages thus constituted the general framework within which specifications for the individual tests were developed. Professor Wilmarth H. Starr, presently of New York University, was appointed Project Director in charge of developing the Proficiency Tests with the collaboration of over one

hundred members of the profession. The Education Testing Service of Princeton (New Jersey), the foremost testing organization in the United States, was engaged to participate in the project by making available its vast technical and specialized resources and by being put in charge of test production and standardization.

Sixty-two preliminary test forms were prepared for administration in the summer of 1960. These forms were administered to secondary school teachers enrolled in the summer institutes established under the National Defense Education Act of 1958. The purpose of institutes is to improve the language proficiency of teachers (special emphasis is given to the spoken language), to give them insights into the foreign cultures through courses with an anthropological orientation, to train them through theory, observation and practice in new methods of teaching foreign languages, and to provide a psycholinguistic rationale for these new methods through the study of applied linguistics. The study of linguistics also provides the teachers with deepened insights into the structures of the languages they teach while they become familiar with the basic techniques of descriptive linguistics.

The entire preliminary battery of tests required almost seven hours of administration time. Using data derived from this preliminary administration, the test construction committees developed sharpened, refined, and shortened versions of the origina tests. These, together with other, more recently developed forms of the tests, constitute the batteries now used in the program.

The Modern Language Association maintains supervisory and consultant services as regards the use of the Proficiency Tests by the profession and the public. The MLA Director of Testing advises institutions of higher education, as well as local and state certification (licensing) agencies, on the use of test results. The MLA is also engaged in promoting and conducting a series of basic studies involving these tests and other foreign language tests.

Since the summer of 1960 through September 1967, the test batteries have been taken by approximately 55,000 individuals. This means that between 385,000 and 390,000 tests have been administered. The administration of the tests through a national testing program was begun in April 1966. There have been six administrations, and over 3500 individuals have taken the tests in those six administrations.

The MLA tests enable qualified teachers to meet certification requirements by offering the test results in lieu of course work. (The tests are available only to authorized personnel and under secure conditions; it is the responsibility of Educational Testing Service to maintain the security of the tests.) Several State Departments of Education use the tests as part of their certification procedures, and the New York College Proficiency Examination Program offers them as a means of granting college credit in foreign languages. The Proficiency Tests are also helping colleges and universities in their recruiting of new personnel for departments of foreign languages. In the FOREIGN LANGUAGE VACANCY LIST (of positions for college teachers) compiled by the MLA in 1966, over 200 of the 500 positions listed indicated the desire for MLA Test scores from applicants. The Association is now engaged in a research project to validate the tests by administering them to native speakers in the five languages (French, German, Italian, Russian, and Spanish) in seven countries. A comprehensive handbook on the use of the Proficiency Test scores is in preparation, and the development of new test forms is being planned.

One fundamental objective of the MLA Testing Program is to enable the candidate for certification to demonstrate proficiency, however acquired, and to do away with the simple (and misleading) counting of semester hours of study. This means that a native speaker of German, for instance, who has not studied his language in the United States can demonstrate through the tests that he is indeed a competent speaker of German and that he is knowledgeable about linguistics, cultural anthropology, and methodology. How he acquired this knowledge (whether in an educational institution or through self-study is considered of secondary importance). On the other hand, a person who has met all the requirements for graduation and for certification as a teacher of German may be found to have a rather inadequate command of the language.

Indeed there has been a trend throughout the U.S. to shift from "credit counting" to "program approval" in teacher preparation and certification, and there has been also a generally favorable tendency to view proficiency tests as a better measure of preparedness to teach. An eighteen-month study of modern foreign language teacher preparation was conducted by the MLA with the support of the Carnegie Corporation of New York and with the cooperation of the National Association of State Directors Teacher Education and Certification (NASDTEC). The study was conducted during 1964-1966, and as a result of it, the recommendation was made that proficiency tests become a part of all modern foreign language teacher-education programs. This recommendation carries the formal endorsement of both the MLA and NASDTEC.

The MLA Tests are available to the candidates in three different combinations: The Complete Battery (all seven tests), Partial Battery A (four skills tests), and Partial Battery B (three content tests: Applied Linguistics, Civilization and Culture, Professional Preparation).

The Listening Comprehension Test lasts about 20 minutes. The examinee listens to a tape recording made by native speakers. This recording consists of single utterances, a connected dialogue, a radio broadcast, and a three-part conversation. For all but the last part, the examinee selects, from among four choices printed in his test book, the responses most likely to be made in the situations presented or the best answers to questions put to him. For the last part, the examinee marks on his answer sheet whether each of a number of statements about the conversation he has just heard is true or false. Questions are designed to test phonetic (or phonemic) discrimination, command of idiomatic expressions, vocabulary, and structure typical for conversational use of the language. Comprehension of main facts, ideas, and important details is evaluated.

The Speaking Test takes approximately 15 minutes. The examinee first listens to a number of sentences spoken by a master voice, then he repeats each sentence. Each of these sentences has been carefully selected to contain two critical sounds or a sound and an intonation pattern. On each sentence, the examinee is scored right or wrong on his reproduction of these particular sounds, all other sounds being ignored.

The test book contains one or two short texts which are to be read aloud by the examinee, following a brief period during which he is given the opportunity to read the text(s) silently for practice. He is scored right or wrong on his production of twenty predetermined points of pronunciation or intonation. The over-all quality of the reading is also scored on a five-point scale extending from 1 (very poor production) to 5 (superior performance).

Finally, the examinee is presented with a single picture, a pictorial sequence, and a situ-

ation depicted pictorially (with directions printed in English). In each case, he is asked to describe the picture or to react to the situation described. Using a five-point scale similar to that described above, the examinee is rated on Vocabulary, Pronunciation, Structure and Fluency. The entire performance is recorded on tape in order to be evaluated by carefully selected and trained experts in the language being tested who must be approved by both the MLA and ETS.

In the Reading Test (about 40 minutes), the examinee is required to select the appropriate lexical, idiomatic, or structural completion for each of a number of incomplete sentences. A series of several short passages is then presented, followed by a series of questions both on the meaning of words and phrases and on the contents of the selections as well. Several short excerpts of poetry are also presented.

The Writing Test (45 minutes) requires the examinee to complete two or more short texts in which words have been omitted. He completes the texts by writing for each omission, on a separate answer sheet, a single word which is appropriate both in meaning and form. (The Russian test differs slightly from the tests in the other languages.) The second part of the Writing Test consists of two or more poorly written texts which contain grammatical, lexical, and idiomatic errors. The examinee is to correct these errors directly on the printed text. He is scored right for each error properly corrected, and wrong for each error improperly corrected or unnoticed. Credit is not given for performance on parts of the test containing no planned errors. (The Russian test again differs slightly in that the errors in the first text are identified by underlining.) The entire performance is evaluated by carefully selected and trained experts who are approved by both the MLA and ETS. The Writing Text is the only one in which incorrect language is presented to the examinee. The justification for this unusual decision is the fact that teachers must constantly correct the mistakes that their students make in writing, and, therefore, they must develop the skill to detect mistakes and to correct them. (The same is true of mispronunciations, and for this reason a new section designed to test the ability to detect typical mispronunciations might be included in future forms of the tests, if at all feasible.)

The Applied Linguistics Test (40 minutes) consists of multiple-choice questions dealing with pronunciation, phonetics and orthography, morphology and syntax, general linguistics, and historical and comparative philology. While the number of questions devoted to each of these topics differs slightly from language to language, the general emphasis in each test is on those differences between English and the foreign language which are of importance in teaching. Questions in this test are in English.

The Civilization and Culture Test (30 minutes) consists of multiple-choice questions in English. The test endeavors to measure the knowledge of civilization and culture (as distinct from knowledge of the language) needed by a teacher to introduce his students intelligently to that area of the world in which the language is spoken. The term "culture" is taken in the broad sense, embracing such content areas as geography, history, the arts, literature, and social institutions. Within this context, questions are designed to test recall of basic facts and terms; understanding of important ideas, themes, and institutions; understanding of the complexity and variety of the culture; appreciation of historical and cultural meaning of terms; appreciation of cross-cultural differences; and understanding of relationships not only among basic facts and terms, but among ideas, themes, and institutions as well.

The Professional Preparation Test (45 minutes) is common to all languages. It consists of multiple-choice questions designed to test not only knowledge of teaching methods that are common to different foreign languages (with emphasis on the audio-lingual approach), but knowledge of important developments in the field of language teaching as well. Questions deal with such broad areas as objectives, teaching techniques, professional development, and evaluation.

The Proficiency Tests have been used in basic and applied research by such members of the professions as Professor John B. Carroll (Graduate School of Education, Harvard University) and Dr. Richard E. Spencer (Head of Measurement and Research Division, University of Illinois). Under a contract between the U.S. Office of Education and Harvard University, Professor Carroll undertook "a descriptive survey and analysis, on the basis of a controlled sample, of the foreign language competence of seniors in U.S. colleges and universities "majoring" or "concentrating" in any of five modern languages, French, German, Italian, Russian and Spanish". The Final Report for this contract was released in the fall of 1967: *The Foreign Language Attainments of Language Majors in the Senior Years: A Survey Conducted in U.S. Colleges and Universities* (Laboratory for Research in Instruction, Graduate School of Education, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1967).

The purpose of Professor Carroll's study "was to assess the overall levels of foreign language proficiency attained by senior class students "majoring" or "concentrating" in foreign languages in colleges and universities of the United States, and to identify factors strongly associated with these levels of competence, with the hope that such information might suggest ways in which foreign language teaching for students could be improved" (Final Report, p. 197). It must be emphasized that a survey of the kind conducted by Professor Carroll is greatly facilitated by the use of measuring instruments such as the MLA Proficiency Tests. Such instruments also guarantee the objectivity of the study and make possible the application of sophisticated and reliable techniques of statistical analysis. Indeed, it constitutes no exaggeration to assert that had the MLA Tests not been available, it would have become necessary to develop something very similar to them in order to carry out the project. Professor Carroll's study also gives evidence of the importance of the research related to the Proficiency Tests, as well as the extent to which he made use of it. Professor Carroll summarized his report in an article that has just been published in *Foreign Language Annals* (I, 2, December 1967, pp 131-151).